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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3149
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: DOWN AND OUT IN TEJEN

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) Poloff visited the town of Tejen (pop.52,000) this week to get a closer look at the place most people refer to as the "drug capital" of Turkmenistan. Located 200 kilometers south-west of Ashgabat not far from the Iranian border, it is connected via rail to the northern Iranian city of Mashed. Even in comparison to many of the country's other rural towns, Tejen looks particularly forlorn. What we saw was a series of dilapidated structures, abandoned warehouses and workshops. and minimal economic activity. Strolling through the bazaar in the center of town, which is open on Thursday and Saturday mornings, we asked vendors, selling mostly Chinese-made housewares, bedding and appliances, "How's business?", to which they almost uniformly replied, "We're barely staying alive." One applicance vendor said that "nobody is buying, because there are no jobs, so nobody has any money." He said that those who are able leave for Ashgabat to try to find work. Once there, they face the problem of undocumented status, as non-residents traditionally have great difficulty obtaining a "propiska" (residence permit) in the capital.

GOVERNMENT SALARIES IN ARREARS

¶3. (SBU) The owner of a small, newly-renovated grocery store with a minimal inventory of local and imported foods told us that he normally takes home only between 100,000 and 120,000 old manats (the equivalent of seven to ten USD) per day. He said the real problem lies with the government's failure for the last several months to pay its employees their salaries. As a result, he said, people cannot afford to buy basic necessities. Many, he said, ask to purchase on credit, something he extends only to a few trusted customers whom he knows well. He was anxiously hoping that President Berdimuhamedov would declare the annual Women's Day bonus, expected to be about 200,000 old manats (about 15 USD) per female employee. "That's my only hope at this point," he said. (NOTE: A retired professor from Turkmen State University confirmed to poloff today that the government, particularly in rural areas, has not paid salaries for the past "four to five months." He says that the workers "dare not say a word" in protest, out of fear of dismissal. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) An elderly, female shoe seller, assisted by her two young grandsons, displayed a series of low-cost Chinese, Turkish and Iranian-made sandals. She reiterated the despair of the other merchants in the bazaar, and said that "on a good day," she might take home 50,000 old manats (less than four USD). She pointed to one of the young boys, who appeared to have a speech problem, and told us that he has a learning disability, and "cannot remember things." The family had apparently taken him to a hospital in Ashgabat for tests, but did not understand what was wrong.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: For most diplomats residing in the capital, provincial towns appear in stark contrast to Ashgabat, with its wide boulevards and street after street of opulent, white marble buildings. Tejen, however, has a hopelessness that is all its own. END COMMENT.

MILES